

# Showcase Festivals: Gatekeepers and Bridge Builders in the Music Industries

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**Abstract:** Showcase festivals are industry events comprising artist showcases and conferences. It may be argued that showcase festivals are an understudied offline field, since their role in configuring and maintaining a festival-like arena and providing a meeting place for the music industries remains largely unexplored from a scholarly point of view, as well as underappreciated and underestimated within the mainstream academic community. Their purpose is to present artists hoping to attract the attention of the core audience: industry professionals looking for new talent to sign and represent. The article provides an empirical study of the Nordic showcase festival by: Larm using theories of gatekeeping, fields and capital.

**Keywords:** *showcase festival • gatekeeping • field-configuring events • capital • ecosystems*

## 1. Introduction

Artists used to play concerts to promote albums. Today, recorded music and songs have become marketing devices to support artist careers (Frith, 2007). The live industry constitutes the most lucrative segment (Nordgård, 2018), and an important part of the experience economy (Hawkins and Davis, 2012). However, a requisite for turning experiential value into economic worth is for the artists to undergo a process of selection (Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000). Selection is required to legitimise their work and gain the required backing from representatives of the music industries (Hirsch, 1972, Caves, 2001, Negus, 2004, Becker, 2008, Foster and Ocejo, 2015). Showcase festivals, premised on an economy of attention, are one arena within the music industries where the transformation is taking place.

We define “showcase festivals” as field-configuring events organised as a music festival providing an industry conference programme, a possibility for networking, and a concert programme (Lampel and Meyer, 2008, Anand and Jones, 2008, Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). Showcase festivals often use existing venues and infrastructure rather than creating an outdoor festival area in, for example, a park. Concerts are open to the public. However, the format of the performances – time-limited performances, or “tastings” where an artist gets to perform anywhere between five and seven songs – is not necessarily to provide an experience. Their purpose is to present artists hoping to attract the attention of the core audience: industry professionals looking for new talent to sign and represent. Considering that the main *raison d’être* of showcase festivals is to facilitate the discovery of the “stars of tomorrow”, they have become important arenas and meeting places in the music industry’s ecosystem. Many of these festivals are themselves cultural mediators and gatekeepers, because successful performances or “winning” the festival can make or break careers. Therefore, studying showcase festivals is a way to understand both the power relationships between agents within a system, and what it is about this system – the music industries – that makes it possible for showcase festivals to play such an important role.

Previous studies of popular music festivals provide comparative insight into their structure, programming and operation (Négrier et al., 2013); their importance within the economy of live music (Holt, 2010); capacity

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for sense-making and classification (Paleo and Wijnberg, 2006); and their pervasiveness as seen through the perspective of festivalisation (Mulder et al., 2020). In comparison, until quite recently, surprisingly little scholarly literature has been written about showcase festivals (Galuszka, 2021, p. 65). Early contributions include case studies on music industry events in Germany (Dobusch and Schüßler, 2014, Schüßler et al., 2014) and what is potentially the most important showcase festival globally: South by South West (SXSW) in Austin, the USA (Wynn, 2015). A slew of newer contributions examine the role of showcase festivals as enablers of career advancement or facilitators of music exports, as perceived primarily by artists or industry representatives (Galuszka, 2021, Ahlers, 2021, Barna, 2021, Everts et al., 2022). By focusing mainly on the perspectives and voices of those who work for organisations producing showcase festivals, the current study differs in its empirical approach.

We propose a case study of by:Larm, founded in 1998, and today one of the most important showcase festivals in the Nordic countries. by:Larm promotes approximately 200 showcase concerts attracting an audience of 7,000 people, among which 3,000 are representatives from the music industries (by:Larm, 2022). For comparison, the SPOT festival in Aarhus, Denmark, features more concerts (300), but draws a smaller crowd: 6,000 people, 1,500 of whom are industry professionals (Medwedeff, 2020). The main research question is: how do interaction and power relationships play out between by:Larm, the artists, and the wider industry?

A theoretical point of departure is that by:Larm acts as a gatekeeper and a bridge builder within the various music industry ecosystems. This pair of concepts shows how actors such as by:Larm have multiple roles and functions in relation to artists, people and organisations in the music industries. We may understand gatekeeping procedures as controlling information that moves through a “gate” in a process involving a form of exercise of power (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009, p. 1). Thus, a gatekeeper is an actor (person or organisation) who regulates someone’s access to or exclusion from something, and the possibility of being rejected may lead to negative associations with the term. In the article, we use the term as an approach to analyse cultural production and mediation as a sociological process. The premise is that different actors, based on their position, (1) make a value assessment and select cultural products from a diverse preselection, (2) position and distribute these products via a platform (the showcase festival), resulting in diffusion creating (3) a symbolic production of cultural preferences and consumer behaviour (Janssen and Verboord, 2015).

Section 2 reviews the literature on showcase festivals as field-configuring events and unpacks our use of the interrelated concepts of gatekeeping and selection. In Section 3, we describe our research design, methods of data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the findings of our analysis, which we subsequently discuss in Section 5, before concluding.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Showcase festivals as music and field-configuring events

The terms “event”, “music festival” and “showcase festival” are polysemous. Polysemy implies they are different categories of a similar phenomenon. Subject to contextual setting, they may be used interchangeably as terminology to describe related types of occurrences (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). We may define events as planned, unique, time-limited opportunities for different forms of social congregation involving more than two participants (Dolasinski et al., 2021). To the concept of events, definitions of music festivals add the dimensions of regularity (annual or biannual event), artistic project (a programme with multiple concerts) and temporality (duration limited to a few, successive days) (Négrier et al., 2013). Thus, for classification purposes, showcase festivals are a type of music festival (Galuszka, 2021), and music festivals constitute a subfield (or class) within the broader domain of events in general (Getz, 2010). What distinguishes a showcase festival from a music festival is their purpose (Ahlers, 2021, Everts et al., 2022, p. 4). Both music and showcase festivals have artistic and economic functions within the music industries (Paleo and Wijnberg, 2006). Showcase festivals additionally have specific field maintaining and configuring purposes (Lampel and Meyer, 2008, Schüßler et al., 2014, Schüßler and Sydow, 2015).

The concept of field-configuring events comes from the literature on management, organisations and economics dealing with conferences, trade shows and fairs (Lampel et al., 2008), award ceremonies (Anand and Jones, 2008), music festivals (Paleo and Wijnberg, 2006) and music industry events (Schüßler et al., 2014). Meyer et al. (2005, p. 467), who conceived the term, describe field-configuring events as temporary spaces of social congregation set within the confines of a defined organisational field, and functioning as places where “...business cards are exchanged, networks are constructed, reputations are advanced, deals are struck, and standards are set”. The concept of field

is construed following institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), where an organisational field represents a defined and recognised social area encompassing the totality of organisations, consumers, professional agents, suppliers and regulatory members. Hence, in the present context, the music industries – recording, publishing and live music – represent a distinct organisational field (Wikström, 2013). Field-configuring events serve an important function in the music industries. This is because they enable processes of networking, sense-making, status attribution and value transformation (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). These processes position showcase festivals as spaces to resolve the question of who will invest in music (Nordgård, 2013), because they reduce uncertainty by enabling pretesting of music on gatekeepers and audiences (Hirsch, 1972, Caves, 2001).

This is why we argue that the dual nature of showcase festival helps build bridges between artists, the music industries and audiences. Showcase festivals are creative products in their own right (music as an experience good). At the same time, they are events seeking to configure and maintain an organisational field (music as an industry and commercial activity) (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). As a creative product, showcase festivals offer what Chaney (2020, p.220) describes as spaces synonymous with escape, socialisation, physical and mental transformation akin to what one would expect to experience when attending rock festivals. The “temporary hypercommunity” of the showcase festival (Kozinets, 2002 in Chaney, 2020) constitutes a liminal space (Wels et al., 2011) – suspended between the known and the utterly unknown. Its allure for general audiences is liberation from their usual social positions, which we can associate with escapism as an important motivation for attending concerts and festivals in general (Mulder and Hitters, 2021). For delegates, meaning individual agents or people working for an organisation in the music industries, the attraction of the showcase festival is taking part in processes of selection and valuation, and making claims to positions in the organisational field. In this context, the “temporary hypercommunity” helps to build or maintain bridgeheads between delegates, organisations and artists within the organisational field. Hence, showcase festivals can be regarded as a mechanism for configuring and maintaining fields.

However, one may assume that part of the showcase festivals’ appeal for both types of audiences is that, besides discovering new music, attendees and festival goers get the opportunity to experience which artists “win” or “lose” the festivals. Picking the winners is an activity undertaken by delegates acting as gatekeepers (Janssen and Verboord, 2015) through processes of selection (Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000). Delegates making choices are supported – albeit indirectly – by audiences acting as curators (Jansson and Hracs, 2018). We discuss selection as a process in the next section.

## 2.2. Gatekeeping as a process of qualitative selection

Gatekeeping refers to different roles and positions in the music production chain (Foster and Ocejo, 2015) associated with mediation between the production of cultural goods and the production of consumer tastes (Bourdieu, 1984 referred to in Janssen and Verboord, 2015, p. 440). In the same way as for festivals and events, there are many different definitions of the term “gatekeeper” in the literature (Foster and Ocejo, 2015, Janssen and Verboord, 2015). Some conflate the role and function of gatekeepers with the role of critics and journalists mediating between producers and consumers (Hirsch, 1972), a definition which is close to Bourdieu’s concept of the new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 325). The issues and challenges of using the concept of cultural intermediary with some precision (who they are) is discussed elsewhere (Negus, 2002, Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Our take is to follow Negus (2004, p. 178), who clarifies that we need to consider what people actually do to identify gatekeepers. Some people act as gatekeepers because their job involves selecting artists and recordings for production, other people are simply messengers passing on information, while a third occupational group work as intermediaries, whose job it is to “socially engineer” a connection between an artist and an audience. Our understanding of the gatekeeper is what Negus refers to as doorkeepers, or those brokers engaged in “... identifying new talent and emerging trends” (Foster and Ocejo, 2015, p. 410) with capacity to exclude or promote players (Janssen and Verboord, 2015).

Hence, gatekeepers are those who select artists for organisations and people for sponsorship and investment in the music industries. Wijnberg and Gemser (2000) describe how gatekeepers work using selection system theory. The premise of selection system theory is that a competitive process establishes the value of a cultural good (an artist in the present context) by letting the preferences of one group (the selectors) influence the outcome (i.e., market performance, recognition, fame and media attention) for the selected. Three hybrid ideal selection systems exist concurrently: market, peer and expert selection. Market selection happens when the consumers select producers (i.e., audiences choosing an artist). With peer selection, the selectors and selected are identical groups (artists choosing artists). Expert selection involves selectors that are “... neither producers nor consumers, but have the power to shape selection by virtue of specialised knowledge and distinctive abilities”

(Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000, p. 324). In the context of showcase festivals, selection systems are primarily expert (delegate) led. However, the market form of selection, whereby audiences engage in valuation processes through feedback in the form of social media commentary (Jansson and Hracs, 2018), may indirectly influence the process.

Janssen and Verboord mention seven “mediating practices” that are often included in the work of the gatekeepers (Janssen and Verboord, 2015, pp.441–442). Of these, selection, connecting/networking and evaluation, classifying and meaning making are the most relevant processes taking place during showcase festivals. Selection involves choosing – this function is the basis of the gatekeeper concept – since in this process one exercises the power to give someone access and at the same time keep the gate closed to others. The gatekeeper’s position is built on a portfolio of who and what you’ve been working with – you’re only as good as your last booking. Networks of gatekeepers use their expertise to mutually strengthen each other, a form of selection and exclusion by itself that makes it more difficult to enter the gatekeepers’ field of view and social circle. By mutually strengthening each other and one’s own network, an identity community is created with a strong front against “intruders”, who must prove their competence and location to get access.

The valuation resulting from the work of gatekeepers actualises key concepts from Bourdieu’s sociology: capital, fields and actors (Bourdieu, 1993, Bourdieu, 1996, Bourdieu, 2011). In Bourdieu’s theory, society is understood as a large space with a hierarchical structure, where positions and opportunities for the players depend on the types, and amount, of capital they possess (Aakvaag, 2008). The three capital forms – economic, cultural and social – together constitute an individual’s total amount of capital. These different forms of capital are per se not directly convertible. “Buying” cultural capital with economic capital is not a given (Bourdieu, 2011). Based on Bourdieu’s concepts, the position and decision-making authority of gatekeepers are related to the forms of capital possessed by field actors. For example, the capital form can be of a symbolic nature, expressing competence and recognition acquired through work (Bourdieu, 2011). These forms of legitimacy endow gatekeepers with the authority to select and produce opinions.

### 3. Methods

We define our study as a most likely critical case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006), by which we mean that by:Larm is a typical example of a showcase festival in the music industries and deals with the majority of the usual challenges and opportunities that similar organisations encounter. The case concept can both denote a study object and a research design (Johannessen et al., 2016, p. 205). In this study, they partially coincide. The article analyses the showcase festival by:Larm as an institution within an organisational field (the music industries) and the appropriation, interpretation and usage of the gatekeeper concept by the players (industry professionals and artists as informants) populating the organisational field.

Our data come from four in-depth interviews with five informants, supplemented with reflections from participant observation during the 2020 and previous editions of by:Larm. One of the authors spent nine weeks observing the day-to-day operations of the by:Larm office prior to and during the 2020 edition. A concrete example of an insight gained during fieldwork that guided the research process is the compilation, updating and dissemination of a list of delegates to assist by:Larm in positioning the showcase festival as a must-attend industry event. The delegate list plays on the psychology of potential attendees, as industry professionals want to know who will attend. by:Larm’s website publishes a selection of a few names. The complete list with contact information, however, is only available to registered delegates. Thus, by:larm restricts knowledge to those who have access, and access requires registration. The observation guided our interpretation of one of the findings: by:Larm’s use of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) for positioning. The second author’s participant observation draws on reflections of experiences attending by:Larm as a delegate over many years, sometimes representing artists who achieved significant career advancements (major label recording and publishing contracts, prizes and awards) because of their showcase performances during the festival. Thus, participant observation serves as a foundation and guiding framework for the study.

We used criteria-based selection (Johannessen et al., 2016, p. 120) for choosing informants, where the criterion was some direct professional relation to by:Larm or experience with performing during the festival. Three of the informants have currently, or had in the past, central roles in the organisation. Two are members of a band who have participated in by:Larm’s showcase program. The informants are anonymised under pseudonyms (Ask, Embla, Ronja, Trym and Thor) to emphasise what has been said rather than who has said it. The band two of the informants play in – Tacobitch – is referred to by name because their by:Larm experience is indirectly identifying.

Data collection follows established procedures for conducting semi-structured interviews (Robson, 2002, pp. 277–283). Interview guides contained a combination of standard (asked all informants) and customised (individual questions and topics) for each informant. We conducted all interviews between January and March 2021 via the Zoom app. The collected data represent 7.5 hours of interviews and 63 pages of transcriptions for analysis and coding. We chose a modified version of Aksel Tjora’s Stepwise-Deductive Induction (SDI) model for coding data. The SDI model uses one inductive, empirically informed (concepts and statements from the empirical data) coding level (Tjora, 2021, pp. 218–219). To capture the complexity of the informants’ points of view when they discussed comparable subjects, we coded the interviews separately rather than using identical sets of codes. The method produced a huge number of codes, which we reduced by thematically organising similar codes to find common discursive patterns throughout the interviews. Following coding, we selected three thematic areas for future analysis, based on: (1) Larm’s position and function; (2) power structures and gatekeeping; and (3) quality understandings and interactions with the music industries.

Analysis and interpretation adopt two of the four strategies suggested by Johannesen, Tufte and Christoffersen (2016) based on Yin’s (1994) methodology: (1) analysis based on theoretical assumptions; and (2) analysis based on empirical data analysis (2016, pp. 212–213). Combining these strategies follows from a research design where the theoretical assumptions have governed the process of data collection, while the empirical data has been the guiding point for interpretation and meaning production: “The search for meaning is often a search for patterns, for consistent findings in a case” (ibid., p. 213). This approach to combining levels of analysis has made it easier to link theoretical perspectives to information from the interviews.

### 3.1. Presentation of the case

by:Larm was first arranged in the Norwegian city of Trondheim in 1998. Conceived as a one-off event, the success of the first event laid the foundation for the festival to become a touring showcase festival across the Norwegian map for the first ten years of its trajectory (Holen, 2011). In 2008, a decision was made to promote all subsequent editions in Oslo, gradually adopting an international, Nordic profile. This has over the years since positioned by:Larm as potentially “... the largest, most prominent and established music congress in Scandinavia” (Olsson, 2011).

by:Larm is organised as a charitable foundation. As a result of the chosen organisational form, by:Larm may be characterised as a foundation-owned firm: a firm whose founders give up their equity stake by bequeathing it to a foundation (Achleitner et al., 2020, pp. 462–463). Consequently, since a foundation is not subject to external shareholder governance or the need to pay dividends, by:Larm uses the operating proceeds for the purposes defined in the foundation charter (ibid.). The foundation’s board acting as governing body defines these concerns and are ultimately accountable for the finances and strategy. Acting on behalf of the board, a project organisation takes responsibility for planning, promoting and producing the showcase festival. The only permanent full-time staff is the general manager. The rest of the administration (approximately ten people) are hired as project workers on a temporary basis (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1998) to programme and produce the conference and showcase programme.

by:Larm’s strategy document for 2019–2022 begins with the “by:Larm compass” consisting of two points with several sub-criteria: (1) by:Larm should strive to be recognised as relevant and progressive; and (2) by:Larm should strive to be a diverse industry festival that is young at heart, gender equal and environmentally friendly.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. by:Larm’s position and function

The informants use words such as *stepping-stone*, *meeting place* and *arena* to describe by:Larm’s position and function. Stepping-stone is a metaphor for by:Larm’s role as a facilitator of artists’ access to new markets or career advancement, while “meeting place” and “arena” align with the objective of professionalising and building bridges between professionals working in the music industries. According to Embla, two curatorial practices help maintain its function as a meeting place and arena. The first is to allow industry professionals to offer ideas and actively participate through processes of co-creation in developing the conference and showcase program. This creates engagement. In Ronja’s words, “what topics are allowed to be discussed and are so essential that it becomes a topic of discourse among delegates at by:Larm are hotly debated,” and “many individuals become upset when their ‘issues’ are left out of the programme”. To ensure relevance, Ronja stresses that curatorial activity must match by:Larm’s own programming. The second is deciding which musicians will perform during the showcase



programme, with a jury consisting of industry representatives selecting parts of the schedule. Embla emphasises the need for ensuring unbiased selection of artists. For example, if someone has financial interests or a close relationship with an artist considered for inclusion, the board step in and have the final say.

The success stories of artists who were discovered and launched their careers through performing at by:Larm have contributed to the festival's position as gatekeeper and tastemaker. Among them are First Aid Kit, Kleerup, Mö, Röyksopp and Sigrid (Yourope, 2022). However, media commentators question whether by:Larm has an undivided positive impact on new artists' careers, discussing if it is still possible for artists to "break" at by:Larm, or if succeeding requires a distinct sound, arguing that by:Larm is a "dream factory" only for the lucky few (Olsson, 2011, Asker, 2012, Klausen, 2017). Some of these critical opinions reflect by:Larm's dilemma of having to be "two things at the same time", according to some informants. They interpret the media backlash as an outcome of conflating by:Larm's position and mission as a charitable organisation (foundation) operating in a commercial field with a particular mandate, i.e. a responsibility to promote new talent. The reality, as defined by by:Larm's mission, is that the showcase festival is a stepping-stone for different types of artists – not just newcomers – regardless of career progression. Besides, the financial position dictates that by:Larm has to book established artists as headliners to sell tickets. For by:Larm, the term "headliners" refer to both established musicians and relatively new performers who enjoy tremendous popularity and clout-bookings that pique public attention and zeitgeist. Cashmere Cat and Boy Pablo were among the headliners at by:Larm 2020. Thus, there is a need to juxtapose the performer chosen to play during the event and by:Larm's focus on maintaining its position as a relevant and important meeting place that representatives from the music industries would readily attend. Therefore, by:Larm's position and function is a balancing act attempting to align the interests of by:Larm as an organisation and the music industries as an organisational field.

## 4.2. Power Structures and Gatekeeping

Selecting certain artists to perform during by:Larm means that others will have to be excluded. Ask compares the music industries as a field with "a cobweb of people saying the right things or giving things *credibility*" – i.e., gatekeepers, emphasising that you "... pretty much can't get anywhere if you can't get past the gatekeepers". Consequently, the gatekeeper system is not structured, but a dynamic organism with credibility as symbolic capital: "... someone decides something because they have credibility, that means being 'trustworthy' (meaning dependable and reliable), so it means that they have a credibility that makes others start following them. And music is very much about following." For illustrative purposes, Ask uses the term "loss leader" to explain this process based on how some record companies can pay huge advances to sign a "credible artist" without great commercial appeal to their roster. The artist's credibility creates upsell by the fact that other, potentially larger and more commercial, artists want to be on the same label. It is about the transfer of symbolic value and the "purchase and sale" of credibility. "As a record label and festival, you are valued by the artists you have and the bookings you make, and such assessments are an important part of the role as gatekeepers – what you 'let through' the gate often has retroactive effect on one's own reputation".

Artists who win the showcase festival are more likely to be the next big thing. Losing entails obscurity or career stagnation. Naturally, many artists who play by:Larm do not become tomorrow's stars. Ask admits there are more examples of the latter. Aside from that, by:Larm according to Ask cannot be held accountable for the artists' potential success: "it's up to them, they must read the room and their audience". Thus, tales of triumphs frequently receive more attention than failures, allowing discourses of success to supersede accounts of underachievement in the public's eye.

According to Ask, the skills needed for booking by:Larm "is not necessarily flair, or having your finger on the pulse ... or whether it's good music ... an important criterion is whether the gatekeepers say it's good music". Ask feels that his opinion might be construed as a contentious viewpoint, but justifies the stance based on respect for the music: "... to sit and listen to things and say 'this is bad, so this is not allowed to play', that's the ultimate arrogance". Ask believes it is more important to analyse the apparatus behind an artist than analysing the music as a product when programming showcase festivals, because a showcase festival shouldn't be about who's booking it: "It's all about by:Larm – and the Booker is just a concierge".

Ask believes that the industry delegates and international media invited to the festival are an equally important part of the gatekeeping function. "Everyone wants to be where everyone else is ... if all the gatekeepers are in one place or another then you will also be there to feel like a gatekeeper ... if you are not there, you are not a gatekeeper." Bringing in the "right people" from abroad – industry representatives and media gatekeepers such

as Pitchfork – makes it easier for Nordic artists to get attention: “Why should a Swedish band go to SXSW if The New York Times comes to Oslo? Because if the NYT is on SXSW, they won’t be watching the Swedish band, but if they’re in Oslo they’ll be watching the Swedish band.”

This gatekeeping mechanism reinforces the notion of by:Larm as an important place to be – the gatekeepers’ arena, as Ask describes it. It is important to create a feeling that by:Larm is a “party” everyone attends. Not participating means you may risk becoming “irrelevant” as a gatekeeper. Thor explains that by:Larm showcases can generate a lot of *FOMO*, especially when it comes to social media: “... everyone knows someone who’s attending by:Larm, and you can see that everyone at by:Larm is talking about one specific thing”. Therefore, taste-making and sense-making are part of the gatekeeper function. According to Ask, the gatekeepers generate not only hype, but *pre-hype*: “It’s a matter of getting ahead of the hype”. To create hype and *FOMO* is to create expectation and demand, which increase mutually in step with each other. A hyped artist who delivers according to (artistic) expectations possesses a sought-after product and consequently has been dealt a good “hand of cards”.

Several of the informants mention Billie Eilish’s performance as a concrete example of how some of these mechanisms work to by:Larm’s advantage in practice. Billie Eilish performed at by:Larm in 2018, before reaching the superstar status she has today. Ask points out how important such artists are in both (1) defining by:Larm as an event; and (2) serving as a trump card for by:Larm that encompasses the twin functions of refuting criticism and booking new artists. “Everyone speaks the ‘Billie Eilish language’ ... If someone complains that by:Larm only books big artists, we parry the argument with the fact that Billie Eilish played by:Larm before she became famous... if industry representatives from the major companies complain that we only book indie artists, we counter by using Billie Eilish as an example ... finally, if an artist has doubts about playing by:Larm, we retort that if by:Larm was good enough for one of the world’s biggest stars, it should be good enough for other artists.” This statement underlines by:Larm’s value for artists on the rise and implies that other artists may achieve monumental success – reinforcing the notion by:Larm should be viewed as a steppingstone to further career progression. Thus, “hype bookings” such as Billie Eilish help fulfil what Embla refers to as one of by:Larm’s success criteria, “that we’ve been able to be the ones who can find things first”. They generate added value for the festival, and constitute a currency that is usable by both by:Larm and the artists long after the performance.

### 4.3. Quality understanding and interaction with the music industries

Ronja and Embla, when asked to describe the interaction between by:Larm, artists and the music industries, explain that the arena that is by:Larm is the result of collaborative efforts between people who are constantly exchanging and networking. Thus, the interplay between different stakeholders becomes a reinforcing feedback loop, guiding and informing the actions of the showcase festival – and to an extent – the process of gatekeeping. Besides exchanges with by:Larm’s administration, gatekeepers often form proprietary networks, where they are in dialogue with and keep each other up to date about interesting new artists. Ask explains that these informal networks sometimes “unlock” the gates for each other through an account of how network recommendation led to the signing of a Norwegian artist by an A&R manager who missed the showcase: “... someone who saw the performance gave notice”. Ronja believes that this highlights why showcase festivals are important for artists, because digitalisation effectively means that a physical platform is needed to get attention and coverage. by:Larm’s gatekeeper function has become even more important in terms of digitisation and digital curation in the form of streaming services and playlists. As Ask says: “You don’t end up on those playlists unless noticed by any gatekeepers.” Audience reaction may influence what ends up on the gatekeepers’ radar after the showcase festival, as Ask’s example highlights.

by:Larm’s function as a stepping-stone brings back the discussion of whether artists can try to work strategically to position themselves to get into the showcase programme, in the hopes of getting noticed by gatekeepers, and open up possibilities to interact with representatives of the music industries. The masked and mysterious techno collective Tacobitch, who made their first live performances during by:Larm 2019, got a lot of hype as a result of the project being secretive and the band members anonymous. Tacobitch consists of musicians who wanted to create something fun together – something different from their other, serious and authentic musical projects. The band’s popularity increased significantly throughout the festival; their showcase performances were packed to capacity and earned rave reviews. According to Tacobitch, several journalists who did not attend the showcases felt compelled to write reviews on the band because of the attention the showcases got on social media. Others were more critical. The magazine *Subjekt* published an interview with Tacobitch under the headline “Brainstormed strategically to get booked by by:Larm” (Vestre, 2019). Tacobitch sees it as a “cool punk story” contributing to their mysterious, weird image, but clarifies that they don’t agree with claims of them being, “a practical joke to take on by:Larm [...]”

showing how easy it is to deceive the industry.” Trym and Thor have played by:Larm in the past with other projects, and refer to by:Larm as a stepping-stone and a quality stamp: “an important thing to do”. However, they have also experienced the bitterness of not getting through the gates in previous editions. Thus, playing by:Larm and “winning” the festival represented, “...getting the by:Larm experience all artists dream of achieving, like the ‘best case’ scenario... we could hardly have foreseen the response and attention”.

Why some artist projects win the game and others fail is for Ask in part a reflection of by:Larm being an arena and meeting place presenting “what is going to come... sometimes artists successfully launch two months later, other times it happens maybe three years later”. This can be described as an asynchronous experience of success. The other part of the problem relates to the lack of a specific qualitative formula for music. Neither is there a success formula nor any formula for “breaking the formulas”. On the one hand, Ask thinks this is fantastic, because if there were a recipe, anyone could follow it. On the other hand, Ask sees the lack of a formula as an explanation for why the music industries also are entertainment industries, governed by games of gatekeeping where industry representatives use artist careers as stakes:

*“... to be completely honest, music doesn’t matter that much. This is not because the music is not important in itself... it is because no one presses play until they realise if it is an interesting story. Music is 50 percent of the package; the rest consists of personality, including image, design, clothing, gender, ethnicity—how one looks, and what expression one has. The music comes at the end, and of course, at this stage, the music must be good.”*

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

In this section, we will discuss the findings up against the research question: how does interaction and power relationships play out between by:Larm, the artists and the wider industry?

The informants’ descriptions of by:Larm’s function and position emphasises the interaction between actors at different levels in the same field, who participate in a form of competitive community-based cultural value production (Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000). by:Larm selects artists, sometimes as a programmer, other times letting others curate the selection. Ask’s depiction of by:Larm as a showcase festival refers to this interaction. Contrasted with Janssen and Verboord’s (2015) description of the various tasks of the gatekeepers, this is an example of how by:Larm’s business is based on networking, evaluation, classifying and meaning-making, and how by:Larm as a product is created through a dynamic process in which several actors – delegates, festivalgoers and gatekeepers – are involved.

The value that by:Larm generates depends on maintaining the position and reputation as a credible actor – “the brand by:Larm” – while meeting the needs of different actors who use by:Larm in different ways. The creation of value and its form depends on the perspective of the agent: for the artists, by:Larm, similar to other showcase festivals, represents a stepping-stone (Ahlers, 2021, p. 8) into a career in music (Everts et al., 2022). For the music industries, by:Larm’s value lies in the functions of being a meeting place and arena helping to cement relationships, build networks and increase its expertise (Schüßler and Sydow, 2015). by:Larm attendance confirms status and position, within the organisational field; as Ask tells us: by:Larm is the gatekeeper’s arena – being a gatekeeper implies attendance.

Based on this, one may interpret by:Larm as an arena for self-realisation at different levels, where all the actors participating “produce” each other and the situation. For by:Larm, it is about the balancing act between meeting different needs, and the value by:Larm creates for these groups depends on the ability to stay in step with time and follow the field’s development closely. At the same time, selection and exclusion are instrumental in maintaining the status of the gatekeeper as “tastemakers” and enhancing the experience of by:Larm as an important place to be. To produce an important experience, it is necessary to create attention: one stands in a tension between idealism and commerciality, and the production is about interaction, circulation and symbiosis.

Ask’s representation of the music field as an organic structure with credibility as currency relates to Bourdieu’s concept of field-specific capital (2011). Any field has distinct capital structures that benefit players by increasing their possibility for mobility within the field, while an uneven distribution of capital is required to maintain the field’s structure. This is about the dynamics that arise through relational differences, where the precondition for something to be valuable and discerning is that there is something else that is the opposite. In the music industry, credibility



is a capital that actors possess to varying degrees, which can be exchanged to improve position and foment opportunities.

As mentioned earlier, much of by:Larm's value consists in the ability to create attention, and this can be linked to Ask's perspective on the image as 50% of the product. Based on this, one can say that *attention* acts as a social capital that converts into symbolic capital, akin to hype or buzz (Caves, 2001, p. 167). Music only becomes important when the buzz is sufficiently established. After creating a buzz, the music must be good.

If we consider Trym and Thor's statements, *authenticity* can be added as another form of symbolic capital. Authenticity is often set up as a counterpoint to *attention*, leading us into the problems associated with commodification of music, and the difficulty of balancing artistic quality and commercial interests. The emotional components of music are incommensurable with profit motives (Hesmondhalgh (2013). However, Trym and Thor's experience exemplify an important point: the crucial thing is the project's ambition, and an objective to become a popular (in the case of Tacobitch) or a commercial success can be as authentic as operating in narrow genres or being extremely original.

Both *authenticity* and *attention* can create enough interest to get an artist through the door at by:Larm (Negus, 2004), which will thus give the artist a certain degree of *credibility*. However, the capital amounts are not static. by:Larm's seal of approval cannot sustain an entire career. Nevertheless, one favourable result of using authenticity and credibility correctly is that these forms of capital get converted into their economic counterparts, owing to the fact that the prerequisites for such conversion are present, which is in line with Bourdieu's presentation of capital transformation (2011). This is directly applicable to the assessments by:Larm must make in order to preserve its position. It demonstrates how numerous players share the institutional success mechanisms of the organisational field. This means that, while all actors in the field value one another, gatekeepers frequently set the threshold for what constitutes "appropriate" quality understandings and values for symbolic capital in the form of attention, authenticity or credibility. Here the notion of *tertius transferens* (the third who translates) is a meaningful description of what gatekeepers actually do (Foster and Ocejo, 2015, p. 406).

In conclusion, it is demonstrated that showcase festivals play complex roles within a hierarchical system of symbolic production, as ascertained based on the evidence presented by the present study, which has interpreted these festivals using theories of gatekeeping, selection, forms of capital, and their possible conversion. The position of actors within this organisational field is dynamic and shifting through the exchange of the field's capital – understood as credibility, authenticity and attention. Consequently, the study discusses both by:Larm as a case study – its capacity for field configuration and maintenance – and the organisational structure of the field (the music industries) which by:Larm is a part of.

The informants' statements make it clear that by:Larm's gatekeeper function consists of many aspects and nuances – being a gatekeeper is not just one thing. Ask's portrayal of the music industry as "a cobweb" shows that the gatekeeper position and everything it entails is a function that is both made possible and necessary based on the structure of the field. Having field-configuring and maintaining events such as by:Larm is a necessary function that has value for artists, the music industries and audiences. This is because showcase festivals such as by:Larm are one way for the music industries to deal with the issues of oversupply and uncertainty (Hirsch, 1972, Caves, 2001). However, by:Larm also reflects growing distances and divides between the two ecosystems within the field of recorded music: Spotify and Bandcamp (Krukowski, 2020). The playlist driven Spotify ecosystem is based on the major labels' economies of scale, and need constant replenishment of artists breaking through, such as Billie Eilish (Waldfoegel, 2018). Bandcamp, on the other side, is about small-scale artists, or music production as a subcultural cottage industry (Krukowski, 2020). On the one hand, as long as more artists want a professional career than the music industries may need, showcase festivals such as by:Larm will be a "dream factory". On the other hand, showcase festivals in different genres or with more artist-friendly profiles, inspired by the Bandcamp ecosystem's ethos, are in gatekeeping terms more horizontal in structure and democratic in nature. While definitive conclusions about whether this is the case cannot be drawn based on a single case study, the idea suggests that comparing showcase festivals could be an interesting future topic of inquiry.

The exclusion caused by gatekeeping is an important part of maintaining by:Larm's position and function. As Ask puts it, if everyone is admitted, by:Larm stops being the arena that presents tomorrow's artists and "what will come". Exclusion involves exclusivity. Exclusivity makes by:Larm's role as a bridge builder relevant, because as a meeting place for the music industries, the event provides some answers to who will invest in tomorrow's artists (Nordgård, 2013). Thus, it is safe to assume that by:Larm and other types of music-related field-configuring events will be important gatekeepers and bridge builders for the foreseeable future.

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